

History of The Grand Union Canal

The Grand Union Canal is Britain's longest canal, covering 137 miles. It provides a waterway link between the River Trent and the River Thames, between Birmingham and London's docks.

The first canal link between Birmingham and London was established in 1790 by way of the Birmingham and Fazeley, the Coventry and the Oxford Canals, a distance of some 250 miles on canals with locks to take one narrow boat. At Oxford, cargoes were transferred onto lighters to travel down the Thames to London. Then in 1791, plans were proposed for the Grand Junction Canal, a broad canal with locks wide enough to accommodate barges, from Braunston on the Oxford Canal to Brentford on the Thames in West London.

The Grand Junction Canal

Work started in 1793 and the entire route was opened in October 1800, cutting the journey between Birmingham and London by 60 miles.

The wide locks were built to take 70-ton barges, in a bid to encourage nearby waterways such as the Oxford to widen their navigations and try to establish a 70-ton barge standard on all the waterways in the Midlands. However, the other independently owned waterways were not keen on the idea due to the cost.

In 1812, the Regent's Canal Company was formed in order to build a canal from Paddington, round London to Limehouse, where a big dock was being planned at the junction with the Thames. The Regent's Canal was completed in 1820. Ninety years later it was connected to the River Lee Navigation by the 1.5 mile Hertford Union Canal.

The Grand Union Canal

Robert Stephenson's London & Birmingham Railway was opened in 1837, mainly following the course of the Grand Junction Canal, and this had a considerable impact on the canal trade. Eventually on 1 April 1929 the Regent's Canal Company took over the Grand Junction, the Warwick and Napton, the Warwick and Birmingham and the Leicester canals, the Soar Navigation and the Erewash Canal together with their branches. This network of canals was called the Grand Union Canal.

The new company launched a programme of modernisation in 1932, including the widening of 52 locks from Braunston to Birmingham as well as piling and dredging. However, money ran out before the works were complete and so the Grand Union Canal was never able to accommodate broad beam boats on its entire route.

The Grand Union Canal in London

➤ Brentford to Uxbridge

Entry to the Grand Union Canal is from the Thames at Brentford. Brentford is said to have been inhabited even earlier than London and there was an ancient fortified ford across the Thames in Roman times; reputedly crossed by Julius Caesar himself. The canal rises 88ft

through 12 locks for 6 miles to the junction with the Paddington Branch. At Brentford is Lock 100 – numbered from Braunston – known as ‘Gauging Lock’ because it was here that craft were charged a toll fee dependant upon the weight and nature of their cargo.

The Hanwell flight of 6 locks raises the canal 53ft in a third of a mile and is a Scheduled Ancient Monument. Side ponds were provided to save water. Near these locks Hanwell Lunatic Asylum was built in 1831, its name later changed to St Bernard’s Hospital. In the high wall alongside the tow path small doors were built so that fire hoses could be pushed into the canal in an emergency. There was an entrance to the hospital near Lock 94, known by boatmen as ‘Asylum Lock’ where barges could enter the grounds to a coal wharf by the boiler house.

A short distance away is Windmill Lane Bridge, built by Isambard Kingdom Brunel when he took the Great Western & Brentford Railway branch line under the canal and the road. He arranged the iron aqueduct and the road bridge one over the other and ‘Three Bridges’ is now a Scheduled Ancient Monument. Above the Norwood locks is a stretch of 27 lock-free miles of water extending to Slough, Cowley Peachey and Camden.

At Bulls Bridge, the Paddington Branch connects to the Grand Union Main Line and extends 13 miles towards London. The Main Line passes the Nestlé plant, opened as a chocolate factory in 1913 by Eugene Sandow, the present company bought the factory in 1929. The railway bridge over the canal was built by Brunel in 1837 to carry an experimental track between West Drayton and Langley a year before the Great Western Railway was opened. Brunel’s bridge now carries the ‘Heathrow Express’ train. At Cowley Peachey Junction is the 5-mile long Slough Arm which opened in 1882.

Cowley Lock starts the climb up the Colne Valley and the Chiltern Hills. The canal was opened to Uxbridge in November 1794.

➤ Paddington Branch

The Paddington Branch joins the Main Line at Bull's Bridge where there is a former toll house. The first stretch of the branch was once dotted with numerous arms and basins serving warehouses and factories. Some of these have been revived in recent years – such as Willow Tree Park and marina. London’s last private dock was built in 1927 to serve the Lyons factory. Horsenden Hill and Perivale Wood - a nature reserve set in 27 acres of woodland built in 1921- provide a rural setting for the canal to pass through.

The canal crossed the Brent Valley on an 1830 concrete aqueduct which carried the canal over the North Circular Road. In 1993, when the road was being widened, this was replaced and the Middlesex crests of three scimitars from the old bridge were saved and mounted on the new aqueduct.

As the canal passes through Harlesden, the Heinz factory, with its distinctive number 57, can be seen. Built in 1925, the canal was used to bring in beans and raw materials from the London Docks until the 1960s.

Along from Mitre Bridge is the vast expanse of Wormwood Scrubs where the life-guards and other cavalry used to exercise. It was used at the turn of the 20th century by aviation pioneers including Claude Graham White. The prison was founded in 1874.

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The canal passes Kensal Green Cemetery, where landing stages were provided for the floating funeral cortèges. Founded in 1832, its 56 acres host an unrivalled array of mausolea, three of which commemorate royalty.

A short way along, the A40(M) swings out over the canal for a short distance. The 3-lane, dual-carriage motorway was completed in 1970 when it was the longest elevated road in Europe, two and a half miles long. At this point the 1801 canal is immediately beside the railway of 1841 and over both of them is the motorway, representing three ages of transport.

Approaching Little Venice the canal passes the old Grand Junction Canal Company's Toll House, where boats would have paid their charges according to the weight and type of cargo they were carrying. The building today houses the offices of British Waterways London. Little Venice, surrounded with magnificent Regency houses, is a triangular area of water, also known as Browning's Pool and Island, after the Victorian poet Robert Browning who lived in nearby Warwick Crescent from 1862 until 1887. The terminus of the Grand Junction Canal was in Paddington Basin at the end of a short branch off Little Venice.

➤ The Regent's Canal

The Regent's Canal leaves Little Venice by another Toll House and approaches the 272-yard Maida Hill Tunnel; it has no tow path so barges were 'legged through' while the horses were led over-ground. As the canal reaches Regent's Park, views of London Zoo can be seen including the aviary - a futuristic structure designed by Lord Snowdon. Regent's Park stands on the site of the original Marylebone Estate used by Henry VIII as a royal hunting ground. It was laid out in its present form between 1812 and 1827 by John Nash and was opened in 1838.

Hamstead Road Lock is the first of twelve locks which drop the canal 86 feet down to Regent's Canal Dock (now called Limehouse Basin). On the way, the canal passes through a half-mile tunnel under Islington which only powered crafts may use and further along is City Road Basin, once the principal basin on the canal serving many wharves and factories. Just beyond Sturts Lock were the Gainsborough Film Studios where a caption-writer for silent films got the opportunity to direct his first film; his name - Alfred Hitchcock.

The canal ended in Regent's Canal Dock where a ship lock led into the River Thames. At one time the Basin was crowded with shipping and barges loading and unloading cargoes. Virtually the entire length of the canal was enclosed by backs of houses and factories. Now, new open spaces have been established to provide a remarkably private and peaceful world of its own. Commercial traffic has given way to trip boats and pleasure craft several marinas and private moorings have been established.

➤ The future

British Waterways London which cares for the Grand Union Canal in London recognises the potential of the canal to provide social improvements, to this end it is committed to regenerating its waterways. Its plans for the future on the Grand Union Canal include a 90-berth marina at Cowley Peachey with pleasure boat moorings, residential moorings and a base for hire boat businesses as well as an information centre and café, urban farm and refurbished boat yard. There are also plans for two major mixed-use developments at Brentford and Paddington.

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Unlike many canals around the UK, the Grand Union has remained in use throughout its 200 year history. Much of its original freight traffic has now declined. An unprecedented programme of investment and regeneration however, means that the canal is today enjoyed by more people and for a wider variety of purposes than ever before.